



If we can get to the research: Questions for the IRB process in community-based research

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Summary

Among the many challenges of community-based research (CBR) is that of receiving institutional review board (IRB) approval. The purpose of this poster is to discuss IRB requirements and processes and their utility, benefits, or hindrance when they are applied to CBR. Through our experiences attempting to conduct community-based research, we came to question who the IRB was really protecting—the university or the study participants—and came to advocate for alternative paradigms for thinking about and applying IRB standards to CBR.

CBR works through the ongoing development of relationships founded on trust, respect, and communication (Leadbetter et al., 2006). In contrast, the IRB process, however much it purports to protect subjects, often serves to reproduce the status quo and keep marginalized groups out of power by preventing their total involvement in the research process.

Indeed, an irony is that CBR seeks to avoid harm and prevent injustices, similar to the IRB. As collaborative process and social justice outcomes are guiding principles of CBR, “the interests of the human subjects involved [are] respected with care throughout the process ...[CBR] is, or should be, far from the evils that IRBs are supposed to combat,” (Brydon-Miller & Greenwood, 2006, p. 120).

We believe CBR is a different type of research and requires a different type of IRB process. Rather than from an ethic of justice perspective, CBR should be analyzed based on an ethic of care. It is appropriate for CBR because it emphasizes relationships and working with communities rather than just avoiding harm. If the IRB operated from an ethic of care, research would be reviewed in terms of relationship development and be sensitive to the on-going and changing needs of the populations involved. Rather than examine risk, justice, or harm as a “greatest good for greatest number” or a one-size-fits-all approach, the IRB would examine each study on a case-by-case and population-by-population basis, considering the needs of each person, community, and issue and examining the relationship and reciprocal benefits that could be experienced by all involved.

In this poster, we will consider implications of using an ethic of care as the guiding principle for the IRB process.

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